The Foreign Policy Centre

FPC Briefing: Bahrain – between Geopolitical and Humanitarian Concerns[1]

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The Kingdom of Bahrain underwent serious domestic unrest in the early part of 2011. While this unrest appeared to be inspired by events occurring across the Arab Spring, unrest reflected the severity of tensions within the state. Within Bahrain, tensions exist between rulers and ruled, between Sunni and Shi'a, and between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Indeed, Bahrain has provided an arena of proxy competition for Tehran and Riyadh that possesses key strategic value for both sides. The fractious nature of internal security challenges has left Bahrain open to the influence of external actors, for whom the stability of the state is strategically important. This strategic importance has often resulted in the safety and security of the general population of Bahrain being overlooked.
The roots of the Arab Spring in Bahrain can be traced back to the accession of Hamad Al Khalifa to Emir, then king, when his father died in 1999. Upon his accession, King Hamad offered a programme of reforms in an attempt to move Bahrain away from its authoritarian tradition, although the lack of implementation of many of these reforms added to the growing discontent that eventually found a release in the Arab Spring.

The Arab Spring in Bahrain began with a 'day of rage' on the 14th February 2011 when a predominantly Shi'a protest movement occupied Pearl Roundabout. The protests were initially peaceful and non-sectarian, although with continued skirmishes, a Saudi-led Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) force entered Bahrain to help ensure the stability of the state. The response of security forces was often heavy handed, with allegations of institutionalised torture of protesters. Protests continue to this day, amidst narratives of reform and un-educated youths driving the protests.

Background

The Kingdom of Bahrain is an archipelago of 33 islands, the largest of which, Bahrain, is located 16 kilometres from Saudi Arabia. According to a 2010 census, the population of Bahrain is 1,234,571, only 568,399 of whom are Bahraini nationals,[2] making Bahrain the smallest GCC state. The Kingdom of Bahrain is rife with sectarian tensions, with some reports suggesting that as much as 75% of the population is Shia.[3] In contrast, the ruling tribe, the Al Khalifa, are Sunni Muslims and rose to power in the 18th century, overthrowing Persian rulers with the help of tribal allies from the Arabian Peninsula. Given this history, "Bahraini Arab Shiites consider themselves the true original inhabitants of Bahrain and surrounding smaller islands."[4]

Given the shared ethnic and religious ties, both Arab and Shi'a, the Shi'a of Bahrain possess close ties with the Shi'a of Saudi Arabia. However, much like their ethnic kin in Saudi Arabia, it is perceived that the Shi'a of Bahrain possess a dual loyalty, to both Bahrain and Iran. Furthermore, again like the Shi'a of Saudi Arabia, the Shi'a in Bahrain "have long been viewed as a potential Iranian fifth column — a legacy of the 1981 coup attempt by the Islamic Front for Liberation of Bahrain, an Iranian-backed Shia militant organisation."[5] Indeed, *al-Jabha al-Islamiyya li Tahrir al-Bahrayn* (the Islamic

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[1] This brief draws upon an article entitled *The Battle for Bahrain* that was published by Middle East Policy earlier this year. See: Mabon, S., 'The Battle for Bahrain: Saudi-Iranian Rivalry', *Middle East Policy,* Vol.XIX, No.2, 2012.

[2] *2010 Census*, accessed September 2, 2012, www.cio.gov.bh/CIO_ARA/English/Publications/census/General%20%20%202011%2002%2006%20-%203.pdf.

[3] Laura Guazzone, "Gulf Co-operation Council: The Security Policies," in *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 30 no. 2 (1988): 134-148. However, the International Crisis Group suggests that this is only 70%; International Crisis Group, *Bahrain's Sectarian Challenge,* http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iran%20Gulf/Bahrain/Bahrains%20Sectarian%20Challenge.pdf.

[4] Simon Henderson, *Saudi Arabia's Fears for Bahrain* (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2011), http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3309.

[5] Dalia Dassa Kaye and Frederic M. Wehrey, "A Nuclear Iran: The Reactions of Neighbours," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 49 no. 2, (2007): 116.

Front for the Liberation of Bahrain), the IFLB was accused by the Al Khalifa of attempting a coup d'état in 1981, along with allegations that the group received help from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard to achieve this.[6]

Although suspicion of ties between the Shi'a of Bahrain and Iran exists, the extent of these ties is difficult to ascertain: "Despite the occasional discovery of domestic plots with confirmed or suspected links to Tehran, Arabic-speaking Saudi and Bahraini Shiites have generally expressed cautious, even wary, attitudes towards their Persian-speaking Iranian coreligionists across the Gulf."[7] Indeed, this suspicion has its roots in the legacy of ethnic conflict between Arabs and Persians that has pervaded Middle Eastern history.

Iranian Claims of Sovereignty and Saudi Arabia's Patronage

Iranian claims to sovereignty over Bahrain have their roots in the 18th century, when ancestors of the Al Khalifa "wrested Bahrain in 1783 from an indirect Persian rule."[8]However, these claims also possess a contemporary aspect, with Hussain Shariatmadari, the editor of the Iranian newspaper *Kayhan*, suggesting that "Bahrain was an inseparable part of Iran."[9]

Saudi Arabia also possesses strong ties with Bahrain, stemming both from the Al Khalifa's tribal roots in the Arabian Peninsula and also from economic ties and shared ethnic and religious bonds. However, Bahrain also serves as a valve for social pressures stemming from strict Wahhabi doctrine within Saudi Arabia, with many Saudis regularly crossing the King Fahd causeway in order to be able to drink alcohol in bars and clubs.

The importance of Bahrain for Saudi Arabia is two-fold. Firstly, Saudi Arabia, along with other GCC states, is concerned about any increase in Iranian power within the Persian Gulf and across the wider Middle East. This concern has resulted in Saudi Arabia actively intervening within several states across the region. One such way the Al Saud have attempted to ensure the stability of Bahrain is to provide financial assistance to the Al Khalifa, including bankrolling items on Bahrain's national budget alongside paying for King Hamad's Boeing 747-400. Ties between the Al Khalifa and Al Saud have also been solidified by the marriage of a son of King Hamad to a daughter of King Abdulla. The second reason for Bahrain's strategic importance is derived from the shared ethnic bonds between the Shi'a of Bahrain and the Shi'a of the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. The Al Saud are concerned that an increasingly empowered Shi'a of Bahrain will result in increasing demands for empowerment from the Shi'a of Saudi Arabia.

Given these concerns, a Saudi led GCC force entered Bahrain under the aegis of the Peninsula Shield Force, via the King Fahd causeway on 14th March 2011. The purpose of their presence was "to support the government against its domestic challengers and deter Iran from becoming embroiled in the conflict."[10] Furthermore, the warning to protesters was clear: "desist or be made to desist."[11]

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[6] Hasan T. Alhasan, "The Role of Iran in the Failed Coup of 1981: The IFLB in Bahrain," *Middle East Journal* 65, no. 4 (2011), 603.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Husain Al-Baharna, "The Fact-Finding Mission of the United Nations Secretary-General and the Settlement of the Bahrain-Iran Dispute, May 1970," *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (1973): 541.
[9] Frederick Wehrey, Theodore W. Karasik, Alireza Nader, Jeremy J Ghez, Lydia Hansell, Robert A. Guffey, *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009), p54. In addition, Saudi Arabia has also sought to lay claim to Bahrain and to formalise this union under the guise of a GCC-Arabian union. However, this appears to be driven either by economic concerns, or as a reaction to the perceived increasing power of Iran.
[10] International Crisis Group, *Popular Protests in North Africa and the Middle East (III): The Bahrain Revolt,* Available from: http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/files/middle%20east%20north%20africa/iran%20gulf/bahrain/105-%20popular%20protests%20in%20north%20africa%20and%20the%20middle%20east%20-iii-the%20bahrain%20revolt.pdf [Accessed 12.04.11].
[11] Ibid.

The involvement, either perceived or actual, of Iran and Saudi Arabia in Bahrain has severe implications for the security of the Gulf region and the wider Middle East. While the roots of this proxy conflict are ideological, the geopolitical importance of the archipelago cannot be understated. As such, the notion that protecting the Al Khalifa regime in Manama is a red line for Saudi Arabia has caused direct military intervention within Bahrain.

The Bassiouni Report

In the aftermath of the uprisings across Bahrain, King Hamad commissioned an official report to look into accusations of human rights abuses. Professor Cherif Bassiouni, an Egyptian-American human-rights expert was tasked with leading the inquiry. The Bassiouni report detailed the deaths of 35 individuals, who included protesters, security forces and expatriate workers.[12] The report also detailed how 4,400 people were "unjustly fired from public and private-sector jobs,"[13] which added to feelings of ostracisation and resentment amongst the Shi'a population. The report condemned government troops for use of excessive force and illegally detaining protesters. With regard to torture, the report suggested that it was "a deliberate practice" employed by several government agencies.[14]

The report, however, dismissed allegations that Iran was inciting the incidents, although this was immediately rejected by King Hamad, whose prepared speech retained the line "that Iran is supporting anti-government protests."[15] This tension between the official report and the response of the King demonstrates the difficulty in ascertaining the nature of Iranian involvement in Bahrain, further separating suspicion from fact.

UK – Bahraini Relations and Export Licences

Much like relations with Saudi Arabia, the UK's relationship with Bahrain demonstrates hypocrisy with London's foreign policy aims. In a speech by William Hague, British Foreign Secretary entitled '*Britain's values in a networked world',* Hague stresses that whilst advancing "British security and prosperity" this is not to be at the expense of human rights. For Hague, human rights, poverty reduction and the upholding of international law are seen "as essential to and indivisible from our foreign policy objectives […] It is not in our character as a nation to have a foreign policy without a conscience, and neither is it in our interests".[16] However, this sentiment appears not to manifest itself within British foreign policy.

Indeed, in the aftermath of uprisings within Bahrain, Britain continued to sell arms to the rulers of the kingdom, despite the allegations of human rights abuses that were becoming increasingly regular. These sales included licences for gun silencers, weapon sights, rifles, artillery, body armour and components used for military training aircraft.[17] This appears at odds with a claim later in the

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[12] Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni, Nigel Rodley, Badria Al-Awadh, Philippe Kirsch, and Mahnoush H. Arsanjani, *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry* (Manama, Bahrain: Bahrain Independent Commission and Inquiry, 2011) Available from: http://www.bici.org.bh/BICIreportEN.pdf

[13] Joost Hiltermann and Kelly McEvers, *Barricaded in Bahrain*, (New York Review of Books) Available from: http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2011/dec/27/barricaded-bahrain/ Accessed 14.04.12REF 46

[14] Bassioni, Op. Cit.

[15] Hilterman and McEvers, Op. Cit.

[16] William Hague, *Britain's values in a networked world*, (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 15.09.10), Available from: http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/news/latest-news/?view=Speech&id=22862713 Accessed 12.04.11

[17] *Scrutiny of Arms Exports (2012): UK Strategic Export Controls Annual Report 2010, Quarterly Reports for July to December 2010 and January to September 2011, the Government's Review of arms exports to the Middle East and North Africa, and control issues - Business, Innovation and Skills Committee* (Parliament, 2012) Available from: http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmquad/419/41913.htm#a43 [Accessed 25.10.12] See also: Richard Norton-Taylor, *Bahrain receives military equipment from UK despite violent crackdown,* (The Guardian, 14.02.12) Available from: http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/feb/14/bahrain-military-equipment-uk Accessed 14.02.12 Alistair Dawber, *UK accused of 'double standards' over weapons exports to Bahrain,* (The Independent, 30.03.12) Available from:

Foreign Secretary's speech when he stated that there is "broad agreement across society and politics that Britain should stand for democratic freedom, for universal human rights and for the rule of law".[18] However, by continuing to issue export licences for the sale of items that, whilst not formally considered dual use, appear to have a dual use capability - either directly or indirectly - it appears that the UK is tacitly supporting the strategy employed by the Al Khalifa. Indeed, one should perhaps question the wisdom of selling a regime that is actively repressing its population any form of arms at all.

If we revisit Hague's speech we find him stating: "It also does not mean that we will overlook human rights abuses in some countries while protesting about them in others."[19] However, unfortunately, when taken in conjunction with attitudes towards Saudi Arabia, and in the context of geopolitical considerations, it appears that overlooking human rights abuses in some countries while protesting about them in others has become the norm.

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http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/uk-accused-of-double-standards-over-weapons-exports-to-bahrain-7600981.html Accessed 30.03.12

[18] Hague, Op. Cit.

[19] Ibid.